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ABSTRACT

For over 10 years, the accelerated schools movement has worked to implement a cohesive philosophy and process for change in over 1,000 schools in 41 states. This paper describes the characteristics of accelerated schools and details the influences that districts have on them. It demonstrates how districts influence the success or failure of accelerated-school efforts by portraying instances of district support, as well as neglect and inadvertent sabotage. The paper next describes the genesis and history of school districts, and uses sociological social-movement (resource mobilization) and institutional theories to understand why the central focus of most districts has consistently been on compliance and control. The following conditions suggest that fundamental district reform may now be possible: (1) an articulated vision of change; (2) a network of agents who can effectively advocate for change at multiple levels; and (3) a shift in the institutional environment. The paper concludes by presenting the first pieces of the vision of a "new" school district that supports accelerated and other restructuring schools--cultural and functional match with its schools. (Contains 57 references). (LMI)

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SUSTAINING SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING BY REFORMING SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to provoke discussion toward reforming school district organizations so they can better support restructuring schools. Reform efforts of the 1980's and early 1990's have mainly focused on "restructuring" at the school level, and this approach has demonstrated some successes (Murphy, 1990; Levin, 1995),[0] but these restructuring schools remain beholden to district offices which function centrally to ensure compliance with state and federal mandates, and to administer and enforce local policies and directives. We believe that a district office focus on compliance and control is fundamentally incompatible with the need of restructuring schools for increased autonomy. If the positive results of school reform are to be sustained and developed, then 'restructuring' must extend beyond the schools and to school district offices. Otherwise, we predict that the positive changes achieved by restructuring schools will be short-lived.

How have we come to this view? Over the past ten years, the accelerated schools movement has worked to implement a cohesive philosophy and process for change in over 1,000 schools in 41 states. During this time, it has become clear that accelerated schools require consistent and sustained district support to maintain their impetus to be innovative and to continue significant change efforts. District 'support' in this context extends beyond provision of information and technical assistance to schools, to encompass flexibility in enforcement of mandates, policies and decision making processes.[1] However, accelerated schools' experiences in the large urban districts where many such schools are located point to a repeated failure to receive such support. Instead, districts (often unwittingly) inhibit creative and innovative efforts of those at the schools due to a prevailing focus on compliance and control of schools. The result is that many accelerated schools in these districts struggle to continue their efforts to change in the face of district obstacles. The experiences of accelerated schools makes it

imperative to consider the possibility of *district* reform that will support their efforts and those of other restructuring schools.

We begin this paper by describing accelerated schools and then detailing the influences that districts have on accelerated schools. Our focus throughout is on district offices of larger urban and suburban systems with high populations of "at-risk" students, as these are the districts where most accelerated schools are located. We will show how districts influence the success or failure of accelerated school efforts by portraying instances of district support, as well as neglect and inadvertent sabotage. The importance, indeed the necessity, of district reform to sustain school restructuring becomes clear through these examples.

Next, we describe the genesis and history of school districts, and employ sociological social movement and institutional theories to understand why the central focus of most districts has consistently been on compliance and control. The literature on school reform, our exploratory case studies, and our field experience over the past decade with accelerated schools, districts, and state departments of education demonstrates that changing this district focus so it can support restructuring schools will be difficult, but nationally there exists an interest in rethinking how districts function, making them open to new and different ways of conducting themselves. We conclude this paper with the first pieces of our vision of a "new" school district that supports accelerated and other restructuring schools.

II. THE NEED FOR REFORMED DISTRICTS

Genesis of the Accelerated Schools Movement

In the early 1980's, Professor Henry M. Levin of Stanford University began to examine alternative approaches to educating children who have traditionally been labeled "at risk." Levin pointed out that 'Great Society' remedial education programs of the 1960's had generally failed to improve education of this group of children. In

place of remediation, Levin suggested an accelerated approach to the education of children, providing enriched academic experiences instead of remedial curricula (Levin, 1995).

In 1986, Levin and a group of Stanford doctoral students began to work with two pilot schools in the San Francisco Bay Area to implement curricula that had historically been reserved only for children deemed "gifted and talented." Through this work, these schools began to show increased test scores, improved staff morale and greater parent involvement. As this early work evolved, a guiding organizational philosophy emerged, centering on the three principles of "Building on Strengths, Unity of Purpose and Empowerment Coupled with Responsibility" (Levin 1987, 1988). Further, these accelerated schools learned to foster the use of powerful learning – the incorporation of hands-on, relevant learning into the curriculum in order to enable students to experience the joy of learning and to understand the linkages between school lessons and their everyday experiences. The efforts of these pilot schools, and of other schools that soon followed, helped shape the accelerated schools model into a coherent and well-developed philosophy and process for whole school transformation, as described next.

The Accelerated Schools Process

Prior to initiating the process, members of a school community assess whether they wish to become an accelerated school. This period of choosing, termed 'buy-in,' generally lasts for several months, as school staff and parents learn about the model, and then collectively decide whether to commit to becoming an accelerated school. Then, with the guidance of a trained coach, the accelerated schools process begins with each school doing a comprehensive self-examination and reflection, called "taking stock," and subsequently forging a "vision" of the schools future that is inclusive of the viewpoints of all stakeholders in the school. By comparing the "here and now," as

illuminated in the taking stock process, with the dream of the future, as outlined in the vision, accelerated school communities work together to examine the challenges that emerge. From this list of challenges, they then build consensus around those that represent their highest priorities. Typical challenge areas identified by an accelerated school might be "achievement," "student morale," "parent involvement," and "curriculum and instruction."

Members of the school community then choose to participate on a committee or "cadre" to work on a particular challenge area. Each cadre uses the "Inquiry Process," an analytical and systematic problem-solving process, to examine its challenge area and to seek solutions. Throughout the Inquiry Process, the cadres continually report their suggestions and findings to the Steering Committee and to the "School as a Whole," the democratic decision-making body which includes parents, students, teachers, administrators and classified staff. No important decision in an accelerated school can be made unilaterally or immediately by one person, but rather must go through a carefully deliberated process involving the stakeholders in the school.

As schools adopt both the philosophy and process, profound and systemic changes occur throughout the school in values, governance, leadership and educational practices. Teaching practices begin to change as schools increasingly adopt powerful learning strategies to advance the academic and social development of their children. There is a growing body of consistent evidence of achievement gains of children in accelerated schools (National Center for Accelerated Schools Project, 1995). The success of the initial accelerated schools has led to a rapid increase in the numbers of schools and regional satellite centers, especially since 1990, as well as growth in the scope of activities of the National Center for the Accelerated Schools Project at Stanford (hereafter 'National Center').

National Center staff have seen the important role school districts play in this development, and have established minimal requirements of support from a district

office for each new accelerated school. Required district support includes funding for a one-fifth time (one day per week) accelerated schools coach, adequate staff development time for those at the schools, and flexibility from the district with respect to district rules. Despite these initial commitments, *ongoing* district support is usually not consistent, as many districts gradually re-impose district decisions on the schools. This inconsistency is not malicious, but apparently is a result of districts doing 'business as usual' without modifying their normal practices in order to nurture accelerated schools. More importantly, National Center staff have observed that as the level of support from districts increases, the relative success of accelerated schools improves; and conversely, certain district activities hinder or even halt the development of their accelerated schools. In the next section, we describe the results of a preliminary investigation that has resulted from these observations.

Findings of The Strategic Initiative Questionnaire

In 1994, the National Center, with funding from the Danforth Foundation, began a comprehensive review of the accelerated schools movement as part of a "Strategic Initiative," designed to shape the future of the project. As part of this Strategic Initiative, the National Center sent out a questionnaire to regional satellite centers (55% response rate) and coaches (48% response rate) across the country. The questionnaires covered a range of topics germane to the accelerated schools movement, including the role of the district office in the implementation of the accelerated schools model.

Responses to these questionnaires pointed to a variety of district practices that support or hinder implementation of the accelerated schools philosophy and process. Central to support or hindrance of schools is how districts choose to enforce compliance and assert control over their schools. We use the word 'choose' because these functions are, to a great extent, at the discretion of districts.[2] More supportive districts

promote flexibility and collaborative decision making with their schools, or function more as a "buffer" between state and federal agencies and the schools, minimizing school-level paperwork. Some of these districts, for example, provide schools great flexibility in choosing staff development days and times, enabling school staff to engage large numbers of parents in the accelerated schools process, as well as to align the timing of staff development with the needs of that school. Other districts provide extra funds to support restructuring activities, and permit schools increased flexibility with existing school and district funds to re-shape programs, as district staff have investigated and invented creative use of funds within the constraints of state and federal mandates. Although many districts support their accelerated schools in some of the ways listed above, there are districts that appear to be much more rigid in their practices: districts direct principals to use a new curriculum which runs counter to approaches decided by the school; districts set staff development days and activities even though the timing or content makes little sense for the school; districts require reports of 'procedural accountability,' (e.g., schools have held prescribed meetings), though this accountability has no clear purpose or benefit to improving schools.

One particularly harmful district practice concerns principal transfers. The leadership and support given by accelerated schools principals are essential for implementing the accelerated school's philosophy and process, but districts generally ignore this when deciding on transfers. When a new principal comes to an accelerated school, he or she is usually unaware of the participatory nature of decision-making in these schools. It then becomes necessary for members of the school community to convince the principal that the accelerated schools process is effective. Sometimes these efforts are to no avail, and the process stops dead in its tracks, despite all the work the accelerated school has done prior to the new principal's arrival.

Other districts ostensibly support school restructuring, but do so by choosing a set of restructuring models at the district level. In one large district, schools whose test

scores dropped below a certain level were mandated to choose one of three restructuring models. The choices were offered menu-style, with no technical assistance or expertise offered from the district to work with the school, determine its needs, and help the whole school community to decide the most appropriate course of action. Instead, the principal of the school was sent a letter with the three choices listed along with a few articles about each reform project, and the school was given a few weeks to decide. School staff in this situation hardly know what 'accelerated schools' means, let alone whether they wish to adopt the philosophy and process. With little understanding from the district about how to support school restructuring, the implementation of the accelerated schools model faces enormous challenges beginning with the buy-in stage.

This example demonstrates the worst case – the district mandates restructuring,[3] but then does little to support its schools, effectively leading to weak implementation. However, even in cases where schools have made an informed decision to become accelerated schools, many districts still provide little technical assistance or information. In particular, when coaches are afforded little time to work with their schools, this increases the burden and time teachers and others in the school community spend on accessing resources, working through group process issues, and so forth. This failure to create time for the coach and school community to meet simply slows down implementation and may eventually halt it altogether.

The Effect: A Need for Reformed Districts

The Strategic Initiative Questionnaire results provided preliminary, yet unequivocal evidence regarding the central role that school districts play in the development of accelerated schools. When districts exhibit high levels of support, the development of accelerated schools is comparatively smooth and rapid – and the benefits of accelerated schools in terms of changed classroom practices and school

climate are more easily obtained. When districts don't provide these supports, but emphasize compliance and control through rigid enforcement of mandates or lack of understanding about school change, it is a major obstacle to the development of accelerated schools. Of course, few, if any districts are entirely flexible and supportive or entirely rigid and unsupportive, but our evidence suggests most districts are not sufficiently flexible and supportive to sustain the long run development of accelerated schools.

Two recent examples clearly illustrate the effect of districts on accelerated schools. In one district, a resource teacher was released from her classroom duties to be the coach for two accelerated schools. This coach did a laudable job of 'launching' these accelerated schools, and the two schools successfully began implementing the accelerated schools philosophy and processes, resulting in new 'powerful learning' techniques in classrooms. However, for reasons unclear to school staff, the district decided to return the coach to the classroom, switching her assignment with no warning or explanation. Both schools are now struggling to remain accelerated schools as their staffs feel demoralized, their efforts undermined by district edict. In the district where schools are required to choose one of three restructuring models, the schools are also constrained by a district calendar with allows them only one discretionary staff development day. In order to successfully launch a new accelerated school, at least five free days are needed the first year. When this district filled the other staff development days for its schools with required workshops and meetings, it left the accelerated school to try and move through the stages of the process in the evenings, causing many teachers to feel overburdened and resentful. These examples illustrate the uncertain future of accelerated, and other restructuring, schools – their efforts simply cannot be sustained in the long run without supportive districts.

Why do most districts continue to emphasize rigid compliance and control of their schools, even though there are increasing numbers of restructuring schools, and

an apparent increase in efforts to promote school-based management (Murphy, 1990)? In short, it is because this is what districts have always done. With increasing specialization by division and expansion of the district bureaucracy, communication up, down, and across the organization has become difficult. With a lack of communication and no shared vision across the various divisions, large districts are much slower to respond to changing management styles than schools. We describe the evolution of districts next to show that these functions have been firmly established and reinforced through key historical periods for nearly 200 years. Following this description we assess whether, given their history, districts *can* reform.

III. THE EVOLUTION OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS

The central district functions of compliance and control are results of the historical and legal context in which districts have emerged. We note three periods of history in the development of districts: an initial period which began in the mid-19th century and lasted until the 1890's; the "Administrative Progressive" era, which began during the early twentieth century, and lasted until about World War II; and the current period that began a decade after World War II and continues to the present. During each of these periods, functions of compliance and control have been more firmly established.

The Beginnings of Districts: 1810-1870

In the decades following independence from England, the educational system in this country was comprised of parochial or other private schools (Campbell, et al., 1985). While many national leaders of this period (e.g., Thomas Jefferson) believed it necessary to create a system of public schools to inculcate citizens with social and political values to preserve and strengthen the country's incipient democratic institutions (Tyack, 1974; Tyack et al, 1987), early involvement in education at the

federal level was muted and indirect at best. In fact, the national Constitution made no provision for public education, and as implied by the Tenth Amendment, responsibility for providing public education was to reside with the states (Campbell, et al., 1985).

The early federal government's indirect influence on the creation of a public education system came about in two ways. First, federal land grants in newly settled areas stipulated a parcel of land in each new town be used for a school. Second, federal legislators used their power to ratify state constitutions by requiring that these constitutions contain provisions for education systems. The federal government's involvement during this early period thus prompted the creation of local schools in every community as well as inducing establishment of state control of education in the states (Kaestle, 1983; Tyack, et al., 1987).

As both older and newly joining states created their own state constitutions, direct provision and responsibility for public education was written into these documents, thus laying the foundation for state governments to hold authority for setting education policy (Yudof, et al., 1992). At the same time, education leaders of the burgeoning cities of the East increasingly pressured state legislators to standardize aspects of education in order to assure that the children of a largely uneducated and immigrant populace would obtain a homogenizing 'common school' experience (Tyack et al., 1987). These local reformers believed this experience could be realized through an education system like Prussia's, in which primary education had become compulsory, and a central bureaucracy controlled the system (Tyack and Hansot, 1982; Kaestle, 1983). Initial attempts to create "The One Best System" of education (Tyack, 1974), began to grow in cities like Boston, New York and San Francisco, as each established its own bureaucratic public school system with a city superintendent and central offices that controlled the hiring of teachers, selection of textbooks, and budget allocations. Leaders of these city school systems successfully lobbied state legislatures to

use their legal authority to sanction local efforts to establish and begin to standardize procedures and organizational structures. (Tyack and Hansot, 1982; Kaestle, 1983).

The result of the top down (indirect federal and state) and bottom-up (local civic) pressures was the establishment of state departments of education in nearly every state by the mid-19th century. In general, these legislators also established regulations pertaining to finance, teacher certification, and choice of textbooks, which presumably represented the bailiwick of the state departments (Tyack et al, 1987). While these initial regulations more firmly established state-level authority over education policy, and laid the foundation for future centralization and bureaucratization at the state level, state departments themselves had little ability to regulate or enforce these new laws. As late as 1880, the average state department of education was staffed by only two people -- a superintendent and assistant (Tyack, 1974; Tyack et al., 1987).

This initial period was characterized by the establishment of state-level authority over education policy, but it was still largely an era of local control of public schools, with different systems across cities, and a variety of local systems in rural areas (Tyack, et al., 1987). However, a basic division of labor was set in place during this period, state governments took responsibility for establishing general laws and policies governing all public schools with an eye toward standardizing education across schools in each state; and the district administrations in the cities assumed responsibility for implementing not only local policies, but also these state laws and directives.

Bureaucracy and Administrative Progressives: 1870-1930

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the industrial revolution stimulated the proliferation of a new form of organization in private industry, characterized most notably by specialization and differentiation of jobs, a set of rules to govern and direct job tasks, and a bureaucratic hierarchy to enforce these rules. A group of educational

leaders, commonly known as "Administrative Progressives" began to advocate the organization of school districts to mimic this organizational form. These educational leaders envisioned school districts with the "technical unity" of a large industry: at the level of production, this meant differentiation of jobs and specification of job tasks; and at the organizational level, this meant a clearly defined hierarchical bureaucracy with rules and regulations specifying roles, authority, and compliance mechanisms (Tyack and Hansot, 1982).

At the school level, these reformers called for explicit differentiation of students and the work of teachers through a mandated system of graded classrooms, class periods, attendance requirements, courses to be taught, achievement testing of students, etc. In order to create such bureaucracies, the administrative progressives advocated a standard and elaborate bureaucratic structure, including departments responsible for personnel, curriculum, attendance accounting, and truancy. These bureaucracies were to be led by the "professional" expert educator, trained in the latest techniques of management in one of the nascent administrative training programs at schools like Columbia, Chicago and Stanford (Tyack, 1974; Cubberley, 1909). Hence, this period began the era of the professional bureaucrat responsible for controlling the work of schools and districts so that it might meet accepted standards (Tyack, 1974; Tyack and Hansot, 1982).

The administrative progressives largely achieved their vision through two processes. First, they successfully pressured state legislators to bolster state education codes. By this time, state legislatures had become the logical site to advocate reforms that promoted standardization in education, because state constitutions had established their authority. These elaborated education codes specified the role of districts in assuring that schools complied with the reforms, detailed personnel procedures, such as the hiring and firing of teachers, and even specified the structure of school bureaucracies, including departments, to carry out compliance activities (Tyack, 1974;

Tyack et al., 1987). These specific school codes in turn necessitated the growth of state education departments, as a central agent to assure that *districts* were complying with these codes.

Second, education researchers, such as Cubberley at Stanford, developed a virtual checklist of characteristics that the "modern" school district should exhibit, and then evaluated districts according to this checklist through "school surveys" as a basis for recommending changes (e.g., Cubberley, 1915). District administrators, who were increasingly trained by these researchers, dutifully adopted these surveys as a means for assessing their districts, and then implemented recommendations of the school surveys (Tyack, 1974). In this way, districts across the country were gradually homogenized, adopting the same departments with the same jobs. The central functions of compliance and control became more established during this period; and the basic structure of school districts to carry out these functions began to be standardized across districts. These functions of districts were supported by state regulation through education codes, and by a growing group of professional "expert" educators trained to manage the development of these growing bureaucracies in support of these functions. Finally, education associations successfully lobbied for other standards to protect and improve members' employment and working conditions of their members, as administrators increasingly gained authority to determine district policy (Tyack, 1974).

Elaborating the District: 1950-Present

In the fifty years since World War II, school districts have become much more elaborate, although their central functions have not changed (Yudof, et al., 1992). Social movements, such as the civil rights movement, led to an increasing federal role in educational governance, beginning with the famous 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling. In the 1960's and 1970's Congress also passed numerous laws and established mandated programs for various groups of students, such as the 1965

Education Consolidation Improvement Act (ECIA), and the 1974 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Yudof et al., 1992). State legislatures retained their primary authority to set educational policy, but during this period, state departments of education also became intermediaries between the federal Department of Education and the local districts in order to assure compliance with federal laws and programs. State mandated programs also proliferated during this period, as various groups successfully lobbied state legislatures to establish programs for various categories of children. School districts were, of course, the logical conduit for administration and compliance of these "categorical" program requirements at the local level, and so have assumed the role of interacting with their counterparts in both state and (in a few cases) the federal education agencies.

One obvious consequence of these relationships is that educational bureaucracies at the local, state and federal levels have grown as mandated categorical programs have proliferated. As an example, the Legislative Analyst's Office of the State of California reported there were 58 state categorical programs in 1992 (LAO, 1992). One could add to this number Federal Chapter 1, bilingual and other federal programs. Virtually all of these programs have some form of accounting and reporting to the state or federal governments, and new departments in districts have been established simply to report that their schools are complying with requirements of these programs (Bardach, 1982; Bankston, 1982). Our purpose here is not to question the merits of these programs (here, see Bardach, 1982). Instead, an argument throughout this section is simply that the progressive growth in state and federal mandates has necessitated that districts spend more time enforcing school compliance with these mandates. As both state and federal regulations and programs have increased in number, districts have grown not only larger, but also more homogeneous, as they all establish the same types of departments or offices to administer these new programs (Meyer, et al., 1985).

Finally, while these regulations from higher levels continue to mount, districts continue to establish more local policies to control their schools. The main effect of this extensive array of federal, state and local mandates and policies has been to foster a highly rule-bound organizational culture within districts. Staff of districts by and large operate within this type of culture, which is clearly at odds with increased decision making authority and autonomy of school sites.

Let us summarize key points about the organization and role of districts that emerge from the historical analysis:

- Districts do not exist in isolation, but are integrated into a system of organizations that is largely tied together by state and federal mandates. Many district offices have counterparts in state and federal education agencies, so that much of district structure also mirrors that of state and federal education agencies. Because the mandates emanate from a central authority (i.e., the state or federal government), districts may look almost identical in organizational structure. Other complementary organizations, such as schools of education in universities, are also part of this system.

- Because the primary function of districts is to assure schools comply with higher level mandates and to control schools via school district policies, district organizational culture tends to reflect this compliance and control orientation. Indeed this orientation is sensible given a long-standing belief among many educational leaders that expertise about educational matters resides above the school site level (e.g., Cubberley, 1909; see also Katz, 1992).

- Thus, the difficulty in altering central functions of districts emerges; changing functions of districts also may require changing this network of organizations and the mandates that connect them. However, there is also a need to change prevailing views about what these central functions are.

- A long term view of the evolution of district organization and functions reveals dramatic changes. In 1840, there were just a few district bureaucracies and these had a very limited set of functions. Presently, the district bureaucracy is a standard organizational form across the country, while the average size of school districts has increased by over twelve times in just the last sixty years (Digest of Education Statistics, 1989). The progressive growth in mandates and local policies has caused the continual establishment of new departments and consequently a progressive growth in district bureaucracy (Bankston, 1982).

This last observation along with the others lead to the following conclusion. While districts have been constantly, albeit gradually, evolving, a main result of this evolution has been the progressive institutionalization of district compliance and control functions, reminding one of the expression, 'the more things change, the more they remain the same.'

The historical analysis along with our earlier discussion suggest there is a basic dichotomy between the needs of accelerated schools and the historically derived central functions of school districts. The development of accelerated schools (and we suspect other restructuring schools) is dependent on several types of support from their school districts, including flexibility with respect to higher level mandates and policies that build the capacity of schools to make and implement decisions. Districts, however, were established and continue to function to ensure standardization and uniformity across schools by enforcing compliance with mandates and controlling schools through

district policy. Given this long standing raison d'être of districts, is it possible to reform districts? More specifically can districts reform so that they support and sustain the development of accelerated schools?

IV. THE POSSIBILITY OF DISTRICT REFORM

To begin answering these questions, we employ sociological neo-institutional theory of organizations and resource mobilization theory of social movements. Each theory on its own has been usefully applied to school district evolution (e.g., Tyack and Hansot, 1982; Reese, 1986; Scott and Meyer, 1994) so application of the theories together should further our understanding of the possibilities and limits of district reform. Our presentation of these theories and our attempts to utilize both theories together is necessarily exploratory, and we anticipate that discussion will help illuminate subtleties and lead to further refinement of our proposed vision.

Interpreting District Change: Resource Mobilization (Social Movement) Theory

A predominant social movement theory of the last 20 years, Resource Mobilization theory (Jenkins, 1983; Gamson, 1985; Tarrow, 1994), identifies the general features of social movements that have been successful in bringing about change. This theory helps to explain why the common school, administrative progressives, and civil rights managed to establish or expand districts. We use social movement theory to explain school districts historically.

In the 19th century, a network of leaders established common schools across the country, based on the perceived need to establish systems of public schools which offered a homogenizing 'common school' experience, which in turn necessitated the original school district bureaucracies. These leaders articulated a clear solution, pushed their agenda forward at several levels (e.g., state legislatures, school boards), and

mobilized numbers of people who visibly supported these solutions (Tyack and Hansot, 1982), actions which generally characterize successful social movements (Jenkins, 1983; Gamson, 1990; Tarrow, 1994). By skillfully pressuring state legislatures, these leaders managed to establish the first bureaucracies and uniform standards across schools, through state laws (Tyack and Hansot, 1982).

Similarly, the administrative progressives gained changes that entrenched the establishment of district authority. During this era, a powerful network of school and business leaders articulated a vision of an efficiency-oriented standard district with clear control functions, while they were able to mobilize resources and support at state and local levels to largely achieve this vision.[4] In the twentieth century, the civil rights movement engaged a strong central leadership (e.g., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Adam Clayton Powell), as well as a network of black churches to both influence national politics and mobilize people to participate in protests at national, state and local levels (Tarrow, 1994). The results of the hard-fought battles of the civil rights movement included laws outlawing school desegregation, and the establishment of federally funded equity-oriented programs (Yudof et al., 1992). However, while many of these laws have done much to address important problems in our education system, they have also increased the number of areas mandated and legislated by federal and state departments of education, resulting in a concurrent increase in district compliance and control functions.

Interpreting District Stasis and Change: Neo-Institutional Theory

Neo-institutional theory provides another, somewhat more conceptual lens on school district organization. This theory has emerged in various forms from the fields of economics, political science, anthropology, and sociology. It's recent revival during the 1970's in the field of sociology, and in particular, its development in the inter-disciplinary field of organizational studies has cast new light upon how formal

organizations are influenced by and interact with their environments. What follows is a brief review of neo-institutional theory in four sections: 1) basic propositions of institutional theory, 2) the effects of institutional environments on organizations 3) institutional maintenance and change, and 4) an argument extending neo-institutional theory to the possibilities of district office change.

Propositions of Neo-Institutional Theory: Three Pillars

In its grandest sense, neo-institutional theory attempts to explain the processes that shape the structure and function of social life in general and organizations in particular (Scott, 1995). Scott defines institutions in the following way...

Institutions consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior... (Scott, 1995, p. 33)

Cognitive dimensions of neo-institutional theory stress how individuals socially construct meaning and adopt "scripts" that guide the choosing of meaningful actions. The cognitive framework stresses "the importance of social identities: our conceptions of who we are and what ways of actions make sense for us in a given situation" (Scott, 1995, p. 44). From this perspective, behavior is constrained because other types of behavior are inconceivable. The normative pillar of neo-institutional theory highlights the importance of values and norms. Kinship relationships, religious systems, common beliefs, and values are examples of normative frameworks where choices are structured by socially mediated values (Scott, 1995, p. 38). Here, individual interests and rational action are necessarily de-emphasized as common values and beliefs guide action. Finally, institutions are also characterized by regulative systems. The regulative pillar identifies explicit regulative processes such as rule-setting, monitoring, and sanctioning activities and focuses on how

these constrain and regularize behavior. The regulative pillar also stresses actors' rational self interests that guide behavior according to a cost-benefit logic. Violating regulations incurs costs; hence, actors behave largely based upon force and fear of reprisal (Scott, 1995, p. 37). In short, institutions are systems composed of cognitive, normative, and regulative forces; particular instances of institutional effects may vary in which of the three forces is stressed, however, all three are present to some extent.

The Effect of Institutional Environments on Organizations

Though institutional theory can be applied to world and societal systems, our particular interest in school districts limits our focus to the effect of institutions on organizations. A main implication is that the institutional environment (specified by the three pillars) imposes structure on organizations resulting in conformity, either because it is taken for granted that this is the proper way to organize, because to do so will receive normative approbation, or because it is necessary in order to obtain resources (Scott, 1995, p. 114). An important resource for educational organizations in particular is legitimacy. Legitimacy, the degree of cultural support for an organization (Meyer and Scott, 1983, p. 201), is obtained by conforming to a common and identified frame of reference (cognitive), a communal moral basis (normative), and legal requirements (regulative). Meyer et al. (1994) describe how U.S. public educational systems from 1940 to 1980 have increased scale, formalization, and homogeneity in response to national trends of standardization and professionalization. In this sense, school system organizational structure is driven by an institutional environment that demands conformity to national educational culture. The strength of the neo-institutional perspective here is that the theory is a powerful explainer of homogenization and stasis. School districts are

bound by the greater environmental pressure, and the ability to break ranks with that structured environment is severely limited.

Institutional Maintenance and Change

Though a strength of neo-institutional theory is its ability to explain organizational conformity, stability, and persistence, this strength is also its weakness. Critics claim the theory pays insufficient attention to change of institutional systems (e.g. DiMaggio, 1988, p. 12). Scott (1995) attempts to address this criticism by marshaling recent studies that examine institutional maintenance and change. With respect to institutional maintenance, Zucker (1988) has posited that instead of organizational inertia being the normal state, institutions tend toward entropy or disorganization. This deinstitutionalization may stem from "flawed social transmission, inadequate socialization, the intrusion of personal characteristics and interests, and changed circumstances that render current practices or beliefs out-moded or ineffectual." As a consequence, vigilance and continual monitoring of the social-cultural environment by key actors is necessary to maintain institutional stability.

Arguments for institutional change have also been developed. North and Thomas (1973) emphasize change in regulative environments if economic benefits (private and social rates of return) are possible. Coleman (1990), examining the athletic organization, NCAA, explains change in institutional structures resulting from threats to social stability by the asocial behavior of a few. Leblebici (1991) describes adoption of innovative practices by actors in positions of institutional power as a result of intense market competition. DiMaggio's (1991) study of the development of art museums focuses on actor self-interest. DiMaggio asserts that "new institutions arise when organized actors with sufficient resources (institutional entrepreneurs) see in them an opportunity to realize interests that

they value highly" (DiMaggio, 1988). At issue in the change and creation of institutions is the self-interest and innovation of actors. Whereas previous discussion has largely focused on abstract environmental structures that constrain behavior, an examination of the literature that stresses change highlights the importance of action by natural persons to maintain and alter institutions (Giddens, 1984). In this light, actors play a key role in the change process and suggest some hope for changing school district organization in ways supportive of school reform.

A Theoretical Argument for Changing the Institution of School District Offices:

The brief review of neo-institutional theory suggests that the key to changing the institution of school district offices is in identifying and developing the role of agents AND identifying and changing institutional structures. Scott (1995, p. 142) illustrates how actors and societal institutions interact to reinforce one another and to channel one another's influence. Applying this notion to district change requires that key actors such as district office personnel, local and state educational organization representatives and other education participants work to invent and develop cultural rule systems (cognitive, normative and regulative) that may eventually replace existing institutional structures. Replacement may imply a specific opportunity in time where existing educational structures are no longer seen as legitimate or congruent with state or national educational culture. Replacement may also imply the deinstitutionalization, or un-maintenance, of existing institutions such that new institutional structures may be introduced. Cognitive, normative, and regulative structures will need to be re-negotiated such that new identities, social norms, and rules and sanctions constitute a new institutional environment. Maintenance of a new institutional environment will require monitoring by key educational actors such that new institutional structures are strengthened and diffused.

This extension of neo-institutional theory towards a model of school district office change is intended to provoke further discussion. The empirical evidence reported by Scott (1995) with respect to causal directions of top-down or bottom-up processes (to what extent does structure drive agents or do agents drive structure?) is unsurprisingly unclear. Apparently, different situations and conditions result in different findings. Further empirical research on school district organization change would certainly prove helpful in illuminating this focus.

Nonetheless, some initial findings from exploratory case studies conducted by the National Center for the Accelerated Schools Project of successfully reforming school districts re-emphasize the importance of changed roles of key district office actors, new district cultures, and innovative decision-making processes (Kuo, 1996, 1997). Some of these findings parallel the cognitive, normative, and regulative structures that underpin the neo-institutional perspective. We have documented the invention and negotiation by actors of new structures in the forms of 1) new roles and identities (cognitive) that shift focus from compliance to service and support , 2) changed district missions and core values (normative) and 3) developing site based management, decision-making, and evaluation practices (regulative).

The Possibility of Reform

Where does this leave us? Visible institutions – including bureaucracies at the federal, state and district level, associations of school bureaucrats, and the educational administration programs in hundreds of universities – as well as the complex web of regulations that links these structures, are major impediments to any meaningful change in the primary compliance and control functions of districts. Besides these visible impediments, there are also normative and cognitive impediments (Scott, 1995). The history of school districts suggests these impediments have constrained alternative

visions of what districts should or could be doing, so reform has meant that districts have just done more of the same thing. Thus, a pessimistic prediction is that any meaningful district change is next to impossible due to this complex set of pressures, and, short of revolution, perhaps the zebra cannot change its stripes (see Levin's query, 1995).

However, the current educational landscape suggests there are reasons to see things differently. For despite these institutional impediments, the world, including school districts, continues to change. As a result of the many educational reforms and initiatives launched over the past ten years, a variety of groups is arguing for district change and attempting to address the shortcomings of the system. Further, we see several conditions which, according to both neo-institutional and social movement theorists, are reason to believe that there is a window opening for significant change. Below, we outline the conditions which suggest that fundamental district reform may now be possible.

1. An articulated vision of change. A vision of reformed districts is being articulated by education reformers at the local, state and federal levels. For example, education researchers such as Levin (1993), Elmore (1993) and Fullan (1991) have begun to identify elements of what a new type of district might look like. State movements, such as the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), and local movements, and the Chicago School Reform movement have realigned authority in favor of school sites while legislation in several states have established 'charter schools' which face fewer state and local rules. Further, proponents of increased school choice (e.g., Pauly, 1991) and school voucher systems (e.g., Chubb and Moe, 1990) envision a world that almost *eliminates* school districts. Increasingly, the idea of reforming district compliance and control functions is being articulated, even if there are alternative visions of a what a reformed district would look like. As mentioned above, the existence of an articulated vision is a

primary feature of successful social movements (Jenkins, 1983; Gamson, 1990; Tarrow, 1994).

2. A network of agents who can effectively advocate for change at multiple levels. Scott (1995) notes that a key ingredient to changing organizations is that there are agents with resources who can command such changes. Tarrow (1994) has a similar analysis of social movements, which are able to succeed when supporters can influence multiple levels of decision making, including federal and state levels, and there exists an established network at the grassroots level. Does this type of network exist presently? We have already mentioned the variety of reform efforts that have begun to advocate for district reform, albeit behind a variety of visions of change. Yet each of these clearly is beginning to exert a good deal of pressure to reform districts and even the overall system of schooling. Consider, for example, the voucher movement, which mounted an effective, although unsuccessful campaign to create a voucher system across all of California. This movement has been gaining support of education leaders in state legislatures as well as a number of cities across the country (Moe, 1995).

The Accelerated Schools Movement itself exhibits this same multi-level support. Professor Levin, founder of this movement, advocates district reform in research writings (e.g., Levin, 1993), and in a 1991 proposal to the New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC). Regional satellite centers located at state departments of education and in universities also are beginning to contemplate district reform. At the same time, those in accelerated schools have become acutely aware of how districts currently affect their efforts, and have begun to advocate for increased district support. Finally, a small but growing group of district administrators, including a handful of superintendents, are working to provide both the flexibility and support that accelerated schools need to sustain their success. Both the accelerated schools and

voucher movements make clear that there is a growing, if unorganized, ground swell for significant district reform.

3. A shift in the institutional environment. Neo-institutional theorists such as Scott and Meyer (Scott and Meyer, 1994: Scott 1995) do not ignore that organizations change. Over time, a structure (e.g. department) or function may be increasingly embedded within an organization, but, at the same time, the environment that surrounds an organization may shift, necessitating an adaptation from traditional patterns. In other words, both explicit rules and implicit norms may change *outside* the organization regarding what an organization should be doing and what it should look like.

Each moment in the historical evolution of districts has presented unique opportunities and challenges, and now is no different. We are observing a multiplicity of movements and pressures that each augur for a fundamental reform of districts (and perhaps our whole education system), as they call into question previously sacrosanct district functions including those of compliance and control. We believe that the *combined effect of these pressures* may compel significant district reform in the coming years – the zebra may be forced to change its stripes. Of course, the moment must be seized, a vision articulated, support organized, if reform is to occur (Jenkins, 1983; Tarrow, 1994). We conclude this paper by taking a first step in this process, by articulating a preliminary *accelerated schools* vision of a 'new' school district, in which district organization and functions become matched to their accelerated schools. We expect that this vision will be refined and altered as movement leaders and supporters modify it, but it can serve as a starting point for discussion. We also hope that other education reformers will join with us to develop a unified agenda of district (and perhaps state education) reform that will support and sustain schools that demonstrate success, like accelerated schools.

A Concrete Illustration of a Potential Application of Neo-institutional Theory

Using neo-institutional theory as a foundation, one can examine how organizational culture functions within school districts by referring to a state's school code regarding personnel issues. For example, California School Code mandates regarding personnel policies (besides those concerned with certification or credentialling of staff) are limited primarily to evaluation and assessment of employees, so district staff are not prohibited from collaborating with school staff and parents in decisions about principal transfers (California School Code, 1995). Yet very few districts offer any meaningful role for school staff and parents in the selection of school principals, because it requires stepping outside the commonly held conceptions of the roles of district and school staff, and parents. On the rare occasion that school staff and parents obtain such a role, it is seen as almost revolutionary (Katz, 1992).

What are the implications of traditional district organizational culture regarding the selection and placement of principals on accelerated schools? This is an issue of particular interest to the accelerated schools movement because, over the past decade, parents and staff of accelerated schools have reported that when a new principal's leadership style is compatible with the accelerated schools' philosophy and process, the progress made at the school continues unabated. However, when principals with a traditional "top-down" management style arrive and they are unaware of the participatory nature of decision making in accelerated schools, progress with the accelerated schools model halts. It would then logically follow that a shift in organizational culture regarding principal selection, placement, and training at the district level might result in a better fit between principals and their assigned schools.

V. TOWARD A VISION OF A NEW DISTRICT

Consideration of explicit legal constraints on districts suggests there is much room for discretion at the district level, and permits us to articulate a relatively unfettered and seemingly radical vision of a reformed district. We recognize, for the reasons illuminated by neo-institutional theory, that attainment of this kind of vision will not occur overnight. Yet its articulation provides a basis for discussing district reform, while also providing the foundation and direction for some initial (and modest) steps districts might presently take to increase support of their accelerated schools. This first stage of creating the new district by willing districts may precede and perhaps hasten more fundamental reforms in districts.[5] This vision is based upon the literature and internal documents as well as voices from the field gathered through meetings and exploratory case study interviews.

After conducting some exploratory case study research of school districts, we are able to focus on two types of support which a district can ideally provide its accelerated schools. The first refers to material or tangible forms of support in terms of personnel, time, money, and specific services or activities such as professional development, facilities, and transportation. The second refers to immaterial or intangible forms of support such as the roles of district office personnel, the organizational culture of the district, and the decision-making processes (Kuo, 1996).

The Vision

The new district would need to reflect what we term a "cultural and functional match" with its schools. We define a cultural match as a general congruence between schools and their district with respect to organizational values and goals. Before defining and describing a "functional match," let us describe the elements of a cultural match.

- Organizational Values. The new district would operate on the basis of a set of shared values with its accelerated schools. For example, the culture of the new district might manifest accelerated schools values such as communication/ collaboration and participation (Hopfenberg, et al., 1993) through systems that stimulated school-district dialogue and decision making around substantive challenges of the district. Education researchers, (e.g., Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991) and practitioners (National Center District Design Conference, 1995) have noted that a set of shared values between schools and the district implies district commitment to the efforts of those at the schools. When interviewed as part of the National Center's exploratory case studies, developing and internalizing core values was mentioned frequently as an important activity which supports school reform (Kuo, 1997).

- Organizational Goals. The new district and its schools would have an agreed upon set of goals for the district and the schools. At the most abstract level, the district and schools would establish a "district vision" as a general statement of what all participants in the schools and district would work towards. Explicit and specific district and school goals would delineate scopes of responsibility and discretion of schools and their district (Levin, 1993). Vision and goals would go through periodic processes of re-assessment and modification to permit adaptation to changing circumstances (Fullan, 1991). In the exploratory case studies, mission statement building and strategic planning were deemed important activities at the district level (Kuo, 1997).

We define a functional match to be a division of functions between schools and districts based on the relative competencies of each, and *largely driven by the needs of schools*. The second part of this definition is highlighted because it implies a

reorientation of districts away from a primary focus on compliance and control and towards support of their accelerated schools. A functional match, defined in this way, then resolves the essential dichotomy between accelerated schools and compliance and control-oriented districts. We identify four functions in which school districts have relative competency compared to schools, 1) providing information, 2) generally building capacity of schools to improve school-level practices, 3) liasoning with other education agencies, including state departments of education, and 4) maintaining systems of school accountability.

- Providing Information. Districts already have systems in place to acquire and transmit information to schools about school and student performance (Cross City Campaign, 1995). In addition, schools like accelerated schools that are making important decisions about their educational programs and practices need information to make these decisions. Provision of these kinds of information, as Levin notes, should "become the responsibility of the school district, since such information capabilities benefit from a centralization and economies of scale" (1993: 204).

- Capacity Building of Schools. Districts also have resources to provide technical assistance to schools in important areas such as staff development, meeting management, and financial management. This function exemplifies a frequent suggestion of education researchers and practitioners to view the district as a "service center" to schools, with a major share of district resources focused towards this function (e.g., Elmore, 1993; Cross City Campaign, 1995; National Center meetings, 1994, 1995; Kuo, 1996). Levin (1993) has also suggested that the district might indirectly support the building of school capacity through pecuniary and non-pecuniary incentives to successful accelerated schools.

- Liaison With Other Education Agencies. One district competency apparent from our discussion in this paper is that of intermediary, or liaison, between schools and state departments of education. Districts have systems in place to meet the reporting and accounting requirements prescribed by state laws and regulations. Absent changes in state laws, districts are also generally responsible for these requirements. However, the liaison function in the new district would place greater emphasis on how other education agencies can best support the efforts of those at schools, while minimal emphasis would be accorded to explicit compliance functions. For example, district staff would aggressively seek waivers of state regulations, when necessary, for innovative school and district-level projects. The compliance and control functions therefore would continue to exist in the new district, but would be less central to district work, and less directive of the work at schools. Also, there is an increasing focus by state departments of education on schools as evidenced by school performance indicators and state testing. This direct focus on schools allows districts to decide how state and federal policies can best be implemented locally. Districts can create unifying visions which incorporate these policies. In terms of resources, it is the local districts which must decide how minimization of the fragmentation of resources can best be accomplished. Districts can allocate resources which are reflective of both their local visions and state and federal guidelines.

- Accountability System. Although accelerated schools will have increased support for their efforts from the new district, there remains a need to assure that these efforts are leading to improvements in desired educational outcomes. School districts have a relative competency in establishing comparative measures of performance, as well as enforcing plans for improvement in cases where schools are not performing well. This control function can be qualified, however, as the new

district should focus on achievement rather than procedural accountability of its schools (Levin, 1993). We also agree wit'. Elmore's (1993) view that those at schools should be part of establishing and enforcing accountability of the district with respect to district goals and functions.

It is clear that we advocate a basic alteration in organizational culture and functions of school districts. We offer a vision of a district that would foster and sustain the development of accelerated schools. Can districts easily and rapidly achieve this vision at the present time? There are formidable obstacles. On the one hand, institutional theory suggests that the combined set of explicit laws and regulations, and less visible normative and cognitive constraints will reinforce the current culture and functions of districts and resist any major alteration of them. On the other hand, the history of school districts shows there has been movement in the structure, size and scope of districts through the years. Because change is at least possible, the vision can be used to suggest and guide small steps districts might wish to take immediately to support their accelerated schools within existing institutional constraints.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we describe the long run challenge facing accelerated and other restructuring schools. They need flexibility and other types of support from districts to sustain school-based decisions and innovations, but instead must contend with districts that have a long standing tradition of compliance enforcement and control. It is our contention that accelerated schools and other restructuring schools cannot be sustained if districts retain this focus.

Is district reform possible? Can districts become more compatible with accelerated schools and provide the necessary support to sustain the development of these schools? It is clear that districts will reform in *some* way given the variety of pressures to reform

that now surround our schools and districts. The vision of a new district articulated above suggests how this reform could support the successes of accelerated schools and other restructuring schools. We look forward to reactions and visions of other reform advocates, as we take this next step in education reform.

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Endnotes

[0] There are a few notable exceptions, such as Chicago school reform (Moore, 1991; Hess 1995).

[1] Districts certainly cannot provide flexibility with respect to state laws. However, districts can help schools to obtain waivers from some state mandates when necessary.

[2] State and federal laws and regulations may provide specific direction in many aspects of school district work such as the administration of special education (Yudof, et al. 1992; California School Code, 1995), but most of what districts and schools are designated to do is in fact left unspecified as to how they should do it.

[3] District-directed restructuring is antithetical to accelerated schools. A usual process is that the school community, with the help of a trained accelerated schools coach, spends several months learning about the model, visiting other sites and exploring the philosophy and process. Once the school community (including parents and students) have had adequate time to discuss and debate, they vote on whether or not to adopt accelerated schools, using a consensus-style ballot. At least 90% of the school community must agree to participate in implementing the philosophy and process for the school to accepted into the accelerated schools network. Obviously, this sequence runs counter to any district policy which mandates schools to become 'accelerated.'

[4] Social movement theorists of the last twenty years have focused on social movements geared towards equity. They focus on movements of those who have been relatively powerless historically, who then challenge established systems of power and authority (Jenkins, 1983; Gamson, 1990; Oberschall, 1993; Tarrow, 1994). Therefore, the "Administrative Progressive" period would not be defined as a social movement by most of these theorists. However, many of the basic features of a social movement are the same, as we point out in the text.

[5] In future papers we will outline a strategy for reaching this vision. We will consider how these reforms might be stimulated at both local levels and across states.

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